

Practice Paper

Telling TELIC stories: celebrating practice in a learning community

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Abstract

In 2013 I completed my masters dissertation and I graduated. My research was on digital storytelling in an organisation, *JISC Netskills*, entitled ‘*Becoming a storytelling organisation*’ and I submitted my dissertation as an [online blog](#). I was asked by Sheffield Hallam University to develop an online resource of stories for the masters in Technology Enhanced Learning, Innovation and Change (TELIC) professional community. This paper tells the story of what happened next.

Keywords: *storytelling; community; professional practice*

Introduction

We are surrounded by stories. These could simply be conversations over coffee, articles in the newspaper or books at bedtime with the children. Multi-billion pound industries survive on publishing or filming them. We are less comfortable thinking about stories in the workplace. Perhaps this is to do with an association we make with stories and entertainment, that they are too closely linked to nursery to be considered in the boardroom. Nevertheless, organisations are filled with people and people make stories even if they aren’t deliberately trying to tell them. My dissertation took the form of a story. It is a case study that looks at one organisation as it begins to think about how stories work and how they can use technology in order to present stories of its own activities to the outside world. The main question I wanted to answer was what role narrative and ‘digital storytelling’ can play in an organisational context

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to assist communication and reflective practice. This paper is not about the dissertation; rather it explains what happened next.

Stories and narrative

Even a cursory read of *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Communities* by Joe Lambert (2013), one of the founding figures in the field, is enough to understand that the ‘digital’ in digital storytelling is just a means to an end. The story is the primary goal that drives the use of the technology. It makes sense, then, to focus most attention on stories themselves. We have been surrounded by stories in one form or another for our whole lives but their ubiquity can make it hard to think critically about what actually makes a story. Bruner (1986, p14) hints at this when he says: ‘In contrast to our vast knowledge of how science and logical reasoning proceed, we know precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories.’ Bruner (1990), along with Garcia and Rossiter (2008) claim that there is something in human nature which predisposes use to narrative and storytelling. Garcia and Rossiter call it an innate ‘narrative impulse’ (2008, p1093). Bruner calls story the ‘currency and coin of culture’ (1990, p16).

If a feeling for story is innate and something that has been part of human discourse since the dawn of history, then it must be providing some useful function for society or individuals. In short, why do people tell stories? Gabriel (2000, p9) perceives 6 main functions of stories:

- To entertain
- Stimulate imagination
- Offer reassurance
- Provide moral education
- Justify and explain
- Inform, advise and warn.

He sees the first, entertainment, as their primary function but also explores how stories in the form of morals or fables have strong didactic elements, passing on socially important lessons between teller and listener. For Bruner (1986, 1990) the importance of story and narrative goes much deeper. He identifies two epistemological modes of thinking about the world. The first, which he calls ‘paradigmatic’ thought, uses observation and reason in order to create ‘good theory, tight analysis, logical proof, sound argument, and empirical discovery guided

by reasoned hypothesis' (1986, p13). It views the world in an abstract way. The other mode of thinking he calls 'narrative' and is in contrast with the 'heartlessness of logic'. Its aim is not to convey empirical truth but to convince people with verisimilitude, or lifelikeness (1986, p11). Narratives are ways of understanding that ascribe believable meanings to events rather than stating the simple observable facts.

Stories give us a mechanism for dealing with change in our circumstances. Related to this, Baumeister and Newman (1994) found that there are 4 drivers that lead people to tell stories about themselves and how they have dealt with situations. Stories, they say, help us to:

- To interpret personal experience as linked to a wider sense of purpose or goals
- To seek value and justification, to show actions taken or events as being morally right
- To seek a sense of efficacy, stories showing the actor as exerting control over a situation
- People seek a sense of self-worth by making stories that show them as attractive or competent to the listener.

By this, autobiographical stories are then not just a way of making sense of the world but also attempting to exert some level of control over it. Stories give people a way of establishing a sense of agency.

Digital storytelling

The term 'digital storytelling' describes a range of approaches and technologies so being able to point to any particular instance and say it is a definitive example is problematic. Lambert (2013) highlights the problem by questioning 'in the 21st Century, what storytelling is not intermediated by a digital device?' (2013, p37) It is helpful to look back at its emergence and to see how it has developed as a way of attempting to put boundaries on the definition. Where authors talk about the appearance of digital storytelling as an approach, even an ethos, they refer to the establishment of the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in California in the 1990s (McLellan 2007), specifically to the work of Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert. McLellan (2007) describes how the phrase was coined by Dana Atchley after he began incorporating digital multimedia into his stage-based storytelling performances. Although Atchley passed away in 2000 selected elements of his work are still available at his website, <http://www.nextexit.com>.

Lowenthal (2009), based on Lambert (2013) describes digital storytelling like this:

‘A digital story, in the CDS tradition, is a 2-3 minute personal story told with the use of graphics, audio, and video’. It is this empowering of the individual through the creation and sharing of their own, authentic story that is a hallmark of ‘traditional’ digital storytelling, although it is present to different degrees in examples of the genre.

Story telling by a professional community

In 2014 I was approached by the course leader of MSc TELIC to ask if I would lead the development of a storytelling web site that hosts the stories of alumni. The aim was to share and celebrate the TELIC community and the experiences of the course and its ongoing collaboration to highlight the value of postgraduate study to professional development and the workplace. I worked with Learning Connections to design develop the web site: a collection of video files that told the stories of six individuals who had graduated from the TELIC course and who were following professional careers in related fields (see Figures 1 and 2).

TELIC Stories

Home | stories | about | contact

A digital storytelling project

These digital stories are told by students and alumni of the Masters in **Technology Enhanced Learning, Innovation and Change (TELIC)** at Sheffield Hallam University. They tell of their experiences of the course and the impact it has had on their professional lives and the workplace.

[Learn more...](#)

Sheffield Hallam University | Sheffield Institute of Education

JISC netskills

Ian's story – "You're never alone"

Ian Guest from Sheffield explains how his use of social media developed during the course and how it has had an impact on his own professional practice.

Chris's story – "A new sense of purpose"

Chris explains how his dissertation, while being a challenge, was a significant step in his professional and personal development.

Sarah's story – "Happily ever after"

Sarah's story is about how dissertation research into organisational change had a dramatic impact on her workplace and her career.

Figure 1: TELIC Stories website (<http://telic-stories.co.uk>)

The stories can be viewed at <http://telic-stories.co.uk>.

A word about the process. The usual methodology for a digital storytelling project is to leave as much in the hands of the storyteller as possible. This includes the development of the story and the production of the video. It's usually done in a face-to-face setting to facilitate conversation and the organic growth of ideas. In the case of *TELIC Stories* this wasn't practical given the distributed nature of the storytellers and the potential amount of training in media production that would usually be part of a workshop.

Instead, I worked individually with the storytellers over Skype to identify and hone a story idea which the storytellers then wrote into a script and recorded, using a smart phone in one case. The visual component was then produced in consultation with the storytellers. As such the finished product is a collaboration but the stories are still strongly and authentically the storyteller's own.

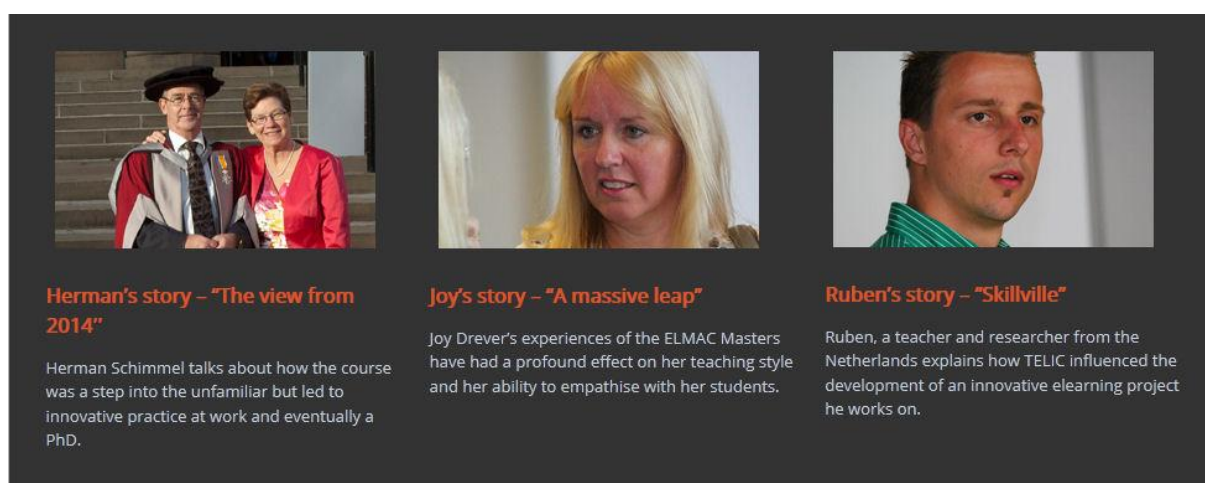


Figure 2: Herman's, Joy's and Ruben's stories

The stories tell of the before and after of academic study. Joy talked about the 'massive leap' and the profound effect this had had on her teaching style and her ability to empathise with students.

'I appreciate the problems students have – we're told they are a generation of 'Digital Natives' but many aren't. So, for me it certainly changed the way I approach teaching and it really helped my self-confidence.' (Joy Drever)

Ian explains how his use of social media developed during the course and how it has had an impact on his professional practice in education. He talked about how the smallest of interactions while studying for TELIC had unanticipated outcomes:

‘Have you tried Twitter?’ asked Geoff Owen as we supped a coffee before one particular TELIC session. I hadn't and in fact other than using an online bookmarking service, had no experience of social media and very little online presence ... and I wouldn't have if someone whose expertise and opinion I had a great deal of respect for hadn't suggested it.’ (Ian Guest)

The sense that you are never alone in a professional network was one shared by others. For Ruben, a teacher and researcher, being part of TELIC helped him to understand what really matters when designing quality e-learning materials.

‘Most importantly, TELIC also helped me to work in a team. Creating Skillville has been a big team effort. I have been working with group of colleagues from the university college. What's interesting is that we have ALL successfully finished the TELIC MSc.’ (Ruben Jans)

Sarah is a learning and development professional working in the pharmaceutical industry when she undertook her TELIC Masters qualification. Her story is about how her ideas of organisational change were transformed and how her dissertation research led to significant impact in her workplace.

‘They were saying ‘this place is not like it used to be’ or ‘it's changed since the new company took over’ or ‘we have too much change around here’ and it suddenly dawned on me, a moment of realisation: there was something more to this!! My interviewees actually wanted to talk about the change itself, not just the technology and what impact they felt the change had had – both for themselves but also for the whole organisation. This really got me thinking. I felt people had a lot more to say!’ (Sarah Archer)

This effect on her thinking was profound – and she even won an award for upholding the organisational mission for continuous improvement! But the rewards are not just in the workplace – sometimes they affect your whole life! Herman was in the first cohort of the course in 2001: he completed the MSc in 2005 and then went on to achieve his doctorate in

2013. He now manages the journal for the TELIC community and has attended all ten of the annual community conferences (and he will be at the 11th taking place in Hasselt Belgium in May 2015).

'I'd never have thought of joining a course about education. No way! And here I was in 2001 as a fresh Masters student in E-learning, Multimedia and Consultancy. I was unsure about the Education part? But multimedia? Yes, that sounded like great fun, because I like graphic design, video editing and lots of internet applications. At that time I worked for a large regional newspaper in the Netherlands as communication manager and thought I could use some extra knowledge about multimedia. But education? I was nervous'. (Herman Schimmel)

These stories are human and real. They reveal the predisposition in human nature for narrative and storytelling (Garcia and Rossiter, 2008). They are the 'currency and coin' (Bruner, 1990, p16) of our professional community.

And what about my story? Well I wrote:

'While I've been doing it I've built up quite a bit of knowledge about something that I love and I've discovered that a lot of people share that interest with me and want to talk about it. Soon, once this dissertation is handed in, I'll be able to file away all my papers and return the books to the library and then it's just about the wait until I find out whether what I've done is worth those few extra letters after my name. M. S. C. Right now though I need a break and think my kids would really like their daddy back.'

Amen to that. ☺

Epilogue

If I had to tell another story about the course it might be about the moment when Professor Guy Merchant asked us in a seminar 'what changes when we learn?' The question created two things: a long, thoughtful silence and a lasting impression.

What *does* change when we learn? I think part of the answer is that *we* change. Our identity takes on a new aspect thanks to the new knowledge, skill or experience we have taken on

board. It's stories that help us to describe this change to ourselves and others and it is what comes through in these TELIC stories.

As learning practitioners from a variety of sectors we as students and alumni of the TELIC MSc, are helping people to change their identities and sense of self. We should also be helping them to form those experiences into stories, to make these transitions meaningful and memorable.

Chris

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